

Philosophy as a preparation for death in Plato's *Phaedo*

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Plato's Phaedo argues that the physical death of Socrates is in fact the liberation of his soul from the prison of his body and that that soul is immortal. But what does that sort of immortality mean, and would we really want it? Compare this philosophical approach with Jon Hesk's discussion of Xenophon on the politics of Socrates' death in the following article.

Plato's *Phaedo* is a dialogue about death. The conversation it enacts leads up to the moment when Socrates, condemned to death by an Athenian jury, drinks the poisonous hemlock and dies. The climax of the work leaves the reader in no doubt that they have just witnessed the end of a great and noble man. Socrates is no more.

Or is he? The *Phaedo* is also a dialogue about immortality, and not just immortality of the metaphorical kind that we might think Socrates has won through being celebrated in this way by Plato and read by us centuries later. Many of the dialogue's central arguments are concerned precisely with the question of the nature of the soul and, in particular, with trying to make a case for the view that the soul is immortal: it never perishes.

Keeping body and soul together

Very early on in the conversation between Socrates and his friends, we learn that living humans are in fact a temporary combination of two very different things: a body and a soul. While the body can be perceived, is physical, grows and diminishes, is created and will dissolve, the soul, by contrast, cannot be perceived, is in its essence unchanging, and is not created or destroyed. Life and death, as a result, must be re-described. A person is alive, we now understand, when a body and soul are combined. (You might say that a living person is an 'animated' or 'ensouled' body.) Death, it follows, is to be understood as the separation of the soul and body. Without the soul, the body gradually decays. Without the body, the soul is released and the *Phaedo* has various interesting stories to tell about what happens to souls after death.

There has always been a great deal of interest in the arguments which Socrates uses to try to convince his audience that the soul is immortal. For the most part, these have generally been found to be less than persuasive. But what if we accept that they are sound, that is that they do indeed validly demonstrate a true conclusion? If that were so, would Socrates' companions be right to feel comforted and not to feel such a loss when their great friend drinks the hemlock? And would we all come away from the dialogue with the thought that death is not to be feared? The answer to this question will depend on whether, when we learn that the soul is immortal, we are being offered an immortality worth wanting. Let me explain.

Prepare to die, Socrates

Soon after telling his audience that life and death are, respectively, the combination and separation of a body and a soul, Socrates adds the idea that philosophy is, in his words, 'a preparation for death'. There are various ways we might understand this. Perhaps philosophy offers a way of coming to terms with

the fact that our lives will come to an end. Perhaps philosophy is a way of coming to terms with the fact that we will sometimes lose people we love. But Socrates explains a further important sense in which philosophy is a preparation for death.

He means us to think that a philosophical life is one in which we try as much as possible to separate the soul from the body *even while we are alive*. This separation is to be achieved by, as far as possible, concentrating on cultivating one rather than the other of the two partners which make us living beings. We are to concentrate on cultivating the soul rather than the body. We are to train ourselves to be indifferent to physical pleasures and pains, to think less of the physical world in general and instead concentrate on our intellectual capacities and, as far as possible, not to be concerned with the changing and temporary things we perceive but with acquiring knowledge of eternal truths.

Socrates himself is supposed to be an example of this 'philosophical life' in action. In various dialogues, Plato offers a portrait of what this sort of philosopher is like. He is indifferent to physical discomfort (e.g. he habitually walks barefoot and without warm clothing even in the depths of winter) and to physical pleasures (e.g. he generally is oblivious to the sexual advances of even the most attractive young men). In short, Socrates concentrates on his soul and neglects his body. Even as a living human, the soul and body are as far as possible separated from one another.

My body is a temple, I mean prison

This is important because those people who, for example, instead indulge in bodily pleasures are tying their soul and body ever more closely together. The soul is being forced to concentrate on bodily demands and desires rather than its proper and natural objects of concern. When such people eventually die the souls are released but remain tainted and encrusted with the damage inflicted on them during the person's life. As a result, the soul must undergo an elaborate and lengthy process of purification before it can ever be restored to its proper pristine state. Life, it turns out, is generally a bad time for a soul; it would much rather be free from the body entirely and only a philosophical life will minimise the difficulties. Socrates even goes so far as to say that the soul is held captive in the body. Just as Socrates is imprisoned and calmly waiting for death at the orders of the Athenian courts, so too his soul is imprisoned in a body but fully prepared and waiting for death to be finally released.

Against that background, is it now true, strictly speaking, to say that Socrates dies at the end of the *Phaedo*? Yes and no. It is true that Socrates the individual, the son of Sophroniscus, the Athenian citizen, dies when he drinks the hemlock. That particular combination of a body and a soul has now been broken. But from that combination the soul – given that it is in fact immortal – will survive. Does therefore Socrates survive? Only if we have come to the view that Socrates is a soul.

If we have been sufficiently persuaded by Socrates' case that we should in fact think of ourselves more as a soul imprisoned in a body than as a physical animal or even as a combination of a body and soul, then, since souls are immortal, so are we. And if Socrates' soul is particularly pure and properly liberated from

his body by his philosophical lifestyle, then Socrates' soul – that is to say, what Socrates really is – certainly does not perish at the end of the *Phaedo* at all. In fact, the end of the *Phaedo* is a release from imprisonment and not the enactment of a death sentence.

Who wants to live for ever?

There are some thorny questions raised by this view and they touch on questions of what modern philosophers call 'personal identity'. What am I? What is it that guarantees that I am now the same person as the one who began writing this essay? When will I end? Plato characteristically leaves his reader to ponder the various possibilities which his work suggests so there are no easy answers to be lifted directly from his text.

But for now, let us return to a question I left hanging earlier: is Socrates' immortality an immortality worth wanting? The force of the question is as follows. Imagine that you accept that (i) philosophy is a preparation for death, that (ii) death is the separation of body and soul, and that (iii) the soul is immortal. Imagine also that Socrates has indeed come to the view that he is a soul and that the end of the *Phaedo* shows the moment when a purified soul is released from its bodily prison. To the extent that Socrates is that soul, then Socrates is indeed immortal.

But this is not immortality of the sort we might normally crave. The purified soul does not retain any memories from the life that has just ended or, it seems, any particular and personal characteristics of Socrates the living human and this might make us pause before accepting that the person or personality of Socrates continues after he drinks the hemlock. (By way of comparison, the soul imagined here is not at all, for example, like the shades of the dead which Odysseus meets in *Odyssey* 11, still bearing the grudges and concerns they had in life.) But surely this apparently impersonal continuity is not what we usually want if we want to be immortal. In short, Socrates wins immortality at the price of giving up any personal continuity after death. Socrates the soul may have been released from prison at the end of the *Phaedo*, but Socrates the man has most certainly died.

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